Conference to Set Women's Agenda into Next Century

In September 1995, thousands of women and men from around the world will meet in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women. Participants will assess how women's lives have changed over the past decade and take steps to keep issues of concern to women high on the international agenda.

Are women better or worse off? The picture is mixed: a greater proportion of women are literate, and more of them are visible at high political levels. At the same time, many women are poorer than ever before, and women's human rights are being violated on an unprecedented scale. The United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) witnessed indisputable progress in some areas, backsliding in others.

"In Beijing, we will determine what can be done to eliminate gender discrimination and promote new partnerships between women and men into the 21st century", says Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the Conference. The coming generation will be entrusted with advancing the achievements of the past two decades. "The pursuit of gender equity is crucial, if the quality of life is to be truly enhanced."

Since 1975—International Women's Year and the year of the first world conference on women, in Mexico City—there has been increasing awareness that what happens to women and their children has a profound impact on the well-being of nations.

The United Nations Decade for Women, and the third world conference on women, held in Nairobi in 1985, had as their theme: Equality, Development and Peace. In Beijing, says Ms. Mongella, we will have to look at how that theme has fared in light of the changes the world has seen over the past decade. Ms. Mongella, who headed her country's delegation to the Nairobi Conference and has served as High Commissioner to India of the United Republic of Tanzania, was appointed Secretary-General of the Beijing Conference in 1992 by United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Today, women are perceived less as passive beneficiaries of economic growth and social and political development and more as key players in their own right, with knowledge, skills and energy. They are active, and activists—in the family, communities and nations—determined to ensure a better world for their children.

Progress and setbacks

At Beijing, delegates from United Nations member countries will look at recent trends affecting the status of women, with an eye to the future. They will review how women have fared in the areas of health, education, employment, family life, politics and human rights. Despite the progress that has been made during the past 20 years, disparities between North and South, rural and urban, rich and poor, continue to concern women everywhere. "Unfortunately", notes Ms. Mongella, "progress has not been felt by women at all levels of society, particularly at the grass roots." The purpose of the Conference, she says, "is not to emphasize the differences

Women

between countries or regions, but to use our diversity as a source of strength and unity. We are going to share our different experiences in order to take action for a better world."

The Conference will focus on persistent problems common to women from all parts of the globe. A disproportionate number of women are either unemployed or working in the informal sector of the economy; environmental degradation is hitting women hard, especially those whose predominant role is in agriculture; armed conflicts in all regions contribute to a growing number of refugee women. Despite success in passing laws to protect women's rights and guarantee their economic and social equality, de facto discrimination persists. Violence against women—while receiving greater attention than ever before—continues and in some places has intensified.

Education: encouraging trends

In many parts of the world, girl children receive less education, less food and less health care than boys. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one sixth of all female infant deaths in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were due to neglect and discrimination (1986 figures). Nevertheless, trends in education are, for the most part, encouraging. The percentage of girls and women enrolled in primary and secondary schools as well as in graduate study programmes rose one percentage point between 1980 and 1988, to 45 per cent. However, despite a declining proportion of illiterate women—from 46.5 per cent in 1970 to 33.6 per cent in 1990—girls and women still represent two thirds of the world's illiterates, and they are becoming literate at a slower rate than are men. These figures have serious implications, since children's health and child mortality rates are affected much more by a mother's schooling than by a father's.

There is concrete proof that women's education leads to fewer births, fewer infant deaths, more women in the formal labour force and greater economic growth. Yet in some 37 of the world's poorest countries, health budgets have been halved, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), largely as a result of the recession of the 1980s.

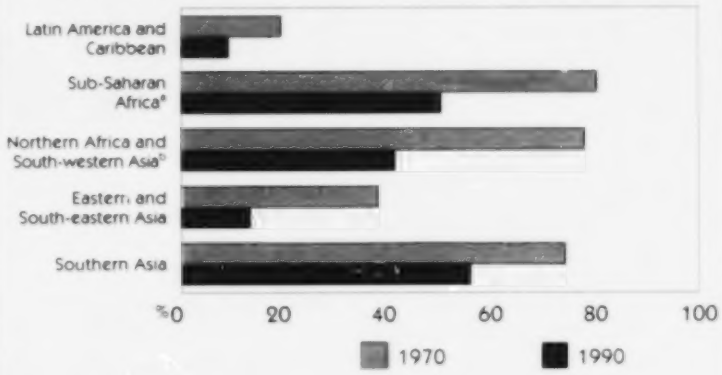
The outlook is good for increased literacy, however. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) predicts that only 28.2 per cent of women will be illiterate by the year 2000, due to efforts by Governments working in tandem with international development agencies and women's groups to come up with innovative ways of boosting female literacy.

Mortality still too high

Women's health has improved substantially in some areas and worsened in others. While life expectancy is greater, and fertility and infant mortality rates have fallen, there has been little progress in reducing maternal mortality rates. Each year at least half a million women worldwide die from complications due to pregnancy, and another 100,000 as a result of unsafe abortions, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The proportion

Illiteracy rates

Illiteracy rates are falling for young women but are still much higher for young women than for men. Over 40 per cent of young women are still illiterate in Africa and southern and western Asia.



[a] Includes Sudan; excludes South Africa.
[b] Includes Somalia and Mauritania; excludes Cyprus and Turkey.
Note: Based on total population of women and men aged 20-24 years in each region.
Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Compendium of Statistics on Illiteracy*, 1990 edition. No 31 (Paris, 1990).

of married women in developing countries who use contraception has doubled within one generation, but an estimated 300 million worldwide still have no access to quality family planning; one fifth of all pregnancies in developing countries are unplanned and unwanted.

Even more disturbing, scholar Amartya Sen reports that, based on global mortality patterns, some 100 million Asian women are estimated to be missing, attributable largely to female infanticide and the abortion of female foetuses. Even in industrialized countries like the United States, gender discrimination in health care is responsible for the deaths of thousands of women.

The problems of women are not different from country to country. They only differ in intensity.

Also, women now constitute 40 per cent of HIV-infected adults, and the WHO is projecting that by the year 2000, more than 13 million women will be infected with the virus and about 4 million of them will have died. Health issues will therefore figure prominently at the World Conference in Beijing, as delegates attempt to address long-term consequences and seek common ground for dealing with the challenges. As Conference Secretary-General Mongella puts it, "the problems of women are not different from country to country or region to region. They only differ in intensity."

Women as workers

Progress in the economic arena has been limited for women. Their participation in the formal labour market increased in many regions between 1970 and 1990, particularly among women with children. Women now represent 41 per cent of all workers in developed countries, 34 per cent worldwide. But while the wage gap may have closed somewhat, women still earn, on average, 30 to 40 per cent less than men for comparable work, and there are many more women than men in lower-paid jobs, according to the United Nations publication *The World's Women 1970-1990: Trends and Statistics*.

Levels of inequality vary from place to place, but the pattern is international. Men are more likely to have regular full-time work and to receive greater seniority and benefits. Nonetheless, women are definitely breaking through what has variously been called the glass ceiling, the bamboo ceiling or the old boy's network, honing their leadership skills and abilities to command respectable salaries commensurate with their work. In the United States, for example, women earned 72 cents for each dollar earned by men in 1990—12 cents more than in 1985. The news is even better for women aged 24 to 35, who earn 80 cents to the male dollar, according to *The New York Times*, which goes on to state that one third of all working women in the United States are professionals or managers, although they comprise only 3 per cent of top executives. This trend appears to be almost universal: in 39 of 41 countries, the proportion of women managers rose between 1985 and 1991, reports the International Labour Organisation (ILO), with the best record in Latin America and the Caribbean (20 per cent).

And while women are entering non-traditional occupations in increasing numbers, most still work in the informal sector, with its insecure and frequently dangerous working conditions; they also far outnumber men in this sector. Known in many parts of the world to be successful entrepreneurs and traders, women have frequently been thwarted in their attempts at financial independence by lack of access to capital and other resources, inadequate education and training, and uneven distribution of assets and responsibilities within the family. Although they usually bear the costs of setting up informal activities, they often turn over the benefits to the male members of the family.

When they do work in the formal sector, women tend to be concentrated in the pink ghetto—clerical work, domestic service, subsistence agriculture and export processing zones, where they account for 70 to 90 per cent of all employees. And although women work longer hours than men—up to 13 hours more, in Africa and Asia—much of what they do is often unrecorded, undervalued or not valued at all.

Women's organizations and the United Nations have been in

Women

the forefront of innovative efforts by statisticians to identify accurately the economically active population, particularly in the informal sector, and determine how to assign an economic value to women's unremunerated domestic, agricultural and reproductive work. The Beijing Conference will showcase ongoing work to refine such statistics and ultimately to use those data to supplement the national accounts that are used in determining policy directives.

Women and poverty

The invisibility of women extends beyond their economic roles. Frequently living on the margin of established society, poor women, migrant women and women refugees are even more vulnerable than men living under the same circumstances.

World events have politicized women to an extent unprecedented in history.

Poverty is one area where women's situation has taken a dramatic turn for the worse, given that women are living longer and have less support from families, husbands and fathers. This is due to a general rise in male migration as well as overall unemployment trends. The number of rural women living in poverty nearly doubled over the past 20 years, and today women constitute at least 60 per cent of the world's 1 billion rural poor. Experts concur that extreme poverty, combined as it frequently is with discrimination, causes the deaths of millions of girls and women, especially the elderly.

Poverty is also apparent in the fact that there are more and more female-headed households—about one fifth of all households worldwide—and the figure is rising. In rural areas of Africa and the Caribbean, the proportion is higher.

Women also make up nearly half of the international migrant population, according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); many female household heads are migrant workers. And although these women generally send more money back home than do their male counterparts, they tend to suffer double, triple or quadruple discrimination, based on their sex, birthplace, class and acceptance of their subordination as natural or inevitable. According to the Fund's Executive Director, Dr. Nafis Sadik, the human rights of women migrant workers and refugees—particularly their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse, and their lack of access to reproductive health services—are now receiving increased attention.

Making political inroads

Women's access to political and economic power is not commensurate with their influence in other spheres of life; they constitute a minority in the corridors of power and decision-making both nationally and internationally. But world events, and the three previous United Nations conferences on women, have politicized them to an extent unprecedented in history. Largely as a result of the United Nations Decade for Women, many Governments have established special offices for women's issues, included women as a key component in development policies and taken steps to increase the numbers of women decision makers. Women activists have been acquiring the managerial and negotiating skills needed to move from the town square to the bargaining table, from the spectator's gallery to the convention centre, in the words of Sharon Capeling-Alakija, former Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

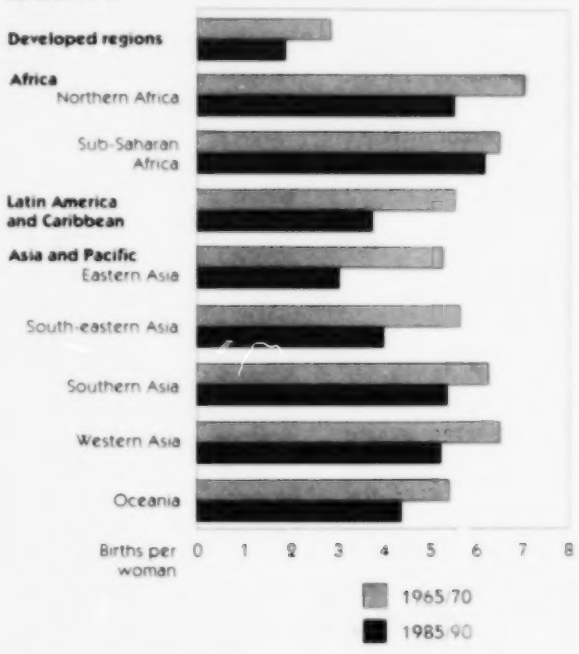
Again, however, the progress is uneven: the proportion of women parliamentarians worldwide dropped from 12.5 per cent in 1975 to 10.1 per cent in 1993. As of November 1993 there were six female heads of Government, and only eight of the 184 Member States of the United Nations had women Permanent Representatives. Women's representation at the cabinet level is less than half that in national legislative bodies, and close to 100 countries have no women in parliament at all.

Of course there are exceptions. In 1993 the Seychelles held the record for the highest percentage of women parliamentarians—45.8 per cent, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union—and the Nordic countries are consistently high as well: in Finland, women comprise 39 per cent of all parliamentarians. In the United States, 1992 was termed

the year of the woman, because of the unprecedented number of women winning elections and, with the new Administration in 1993, political appointments. It is notable that the developing countries have a better record of women's parliamentary representation (12 per cent) than the industrialized nations (9 per cent).

Fertility trends

Fertility rates have declined significantly in all regions except sub-Saharan Africa.



Source: Averages for each region calculated by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat from *World Population Prospects 1988* (United Nations publication, Sales No.E.89.XIII.7).

At the international level, including the United Nations, while the situation remains discouraging, more women than before hold top positions. At the end of 1993, six of the most influential positions in the United Nations system were held by women, and the Secretary-General has committed himself to achieving a 50-50 ratio of women in professional posts by the year 2000. In 1975, women occupied 16 per cent of such posts in the United Nations secretariat, and, as of June 1993, 31.3 per cent. They now constitute roughly 25 per cent of all civilians engaged in peace-keeping operations, as opposed to 5 per cent in 1970.

The United Nations proclamation in 1975 of International Women's Year and of the United Nations Decade for Women inspired women to take charge of many areas of their lives. In response to critical levels of pollution, deforestation and desertification, for example, women—who are the main providers of food, fuel and water for their families in most of the developing world—are now recognized as being at the forefront of environmental preservation efforts. The women's movement, working closely with bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, has played its part in formulating the new paradigm for development which has emerged over the past 10 years: more centred around people than economics, it is by definition women-centred as well, because of the crucial and versatile roles women play in the economic and social development of their communities. At the same time, gender analysis and gender planning have emerged as tools for development specialists who focus on the relations between women and men in all areas. As such, they will figure prominently in the assessments being undertaken for Beijing.

The gender perspective has already had an impact on the restructuring of the United Nations. Early in 1993 a new department was created—the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development—whose responsibilities include overseeing both the Beijing Conference and the World Summit for Social Development, which will be held in Copenhagen in March 1995. Under-Secretary-General Nitin Desai, who heads the department, stresses that one of its major tasks is to ensure the integrated development of policy, part of which is looking at economic, social and environmental issues through the lens of gender.

A Platform for Action

The 1995 Conference will adopt a Platform for Action, analysing obstacles to women's advancement and recommending steps for overcoming them. Both that document and the preparatory work leading up to the Conference at the national and regional levels are intended to mobilize society to meet the challenges and demands of the next century.

While much of the Conference will be dedicated to planning for the future, as reflected in the Platform for Action, delegates will also be making a critical assessment of the past—of areas in which advances, or setbacks, have been made since 1985,

when goals to the year 2000 were established at the Nairobi Conference. Known as the *Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*, those goals were an appeal for government strategies to address the impact on women of government policies in areas such as employment, education, industrial investment, housing, transportation and the environment.

The Platform is intended to speed up the process of making the *Forward-looking Strategies* a reality, by proposing actions to be taken by policy makers and by women and men at the grass roots. The proposed actions will have realistic and quantifiable targets; the average woman could either undertake them herself or ask her political leaders to do so. They will focus on ten critical areas of concern: power-sharing; commitment to women's rights; poverty; education and health; violence against women; the effects of armed or other kinds of conflict; economic participation; insufficient mechanisms to promote women's advancement; mass media; and environment and development.

Women have an impact on policies in their own countries, as well as on international legislation.

The goals of the *Forward-looking Strategies*, which are intended to be implemented by the year 2000, are deliberately ambitious. In the legal domain, they include equal rights for women, the abolition of slavery and prostitution, establishing a legal minimum age for marriage and punishing female infanticide. At the social policy level, the Strategies call for access by all women to maternity leave, maternal health care, family planning, nutrition and education, as well as for increased national health budgets. Governments are asked to develop incentives for the provision of child care and to start campaigns for equal sharing of domestic responsibilities. The percentage of women in politics and management is to be increased, and there is a call for legislation to prevent violence against women and eliminate female circumcision.

Stronger focus on human rights

Violence, rape, torture, humiliation, anger and anguish are all too familiar to women around the world. But as Ms. Mongella observes, the silence of the world community in the face of women's rights violations has been almost deafening. She feels it is crucial that the Conference help people see that women's human rights are the same, and have the same value, as men's human rights.

One of the major achievements of the past 10 years has been the support by a growing number of countries for the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, which legally binds them to achieve equal rights for women in all fields—political, economic, social, cultural and civil. First adopted in 1979, it has now been accepted by 133 countries. However, many of those countries have placed reservations on key provisions that they view as conflicting with their religious or cultural practices, especially with regard to marriage and family law—an area notorious for discrimination against women.

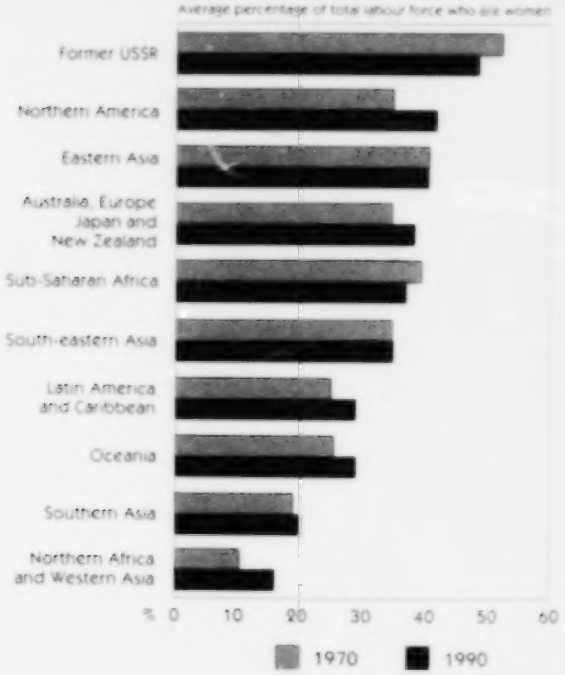
Women's human rights have also gained increasing recognition in recent years as the focus of women activists has expanded from economic development and equality to encompass more immediate and personal threats against women's well-being. Violence against women, for example, was not even mentioned in the 1979 Convention because it was not generally recognized as a human rights problem. Now, however, it is receiving urgent attention, in part because the *Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies* helped people to see the close connection between violence at the personal and international levels. Today many women's rights watch organizations are energetically engaged in getting women's human rights onto the international and national agenda.

Women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attending the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna aggressively lobbied delegates to include references to women's human rights in the final document adopted there, the *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*. They helped draft the Declaration on Violence against Women, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1993.

This ground-breaking document is the first universal legal instrument aimed specifically at combatting violence against women and putting that abuse on the map of international human rights legislation.

Working women

Women's share in the labour force increased between 1970 and 1990 in almost every region.



Source: Prepared by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat from International Labour Office, *Economically Active Population–Estimates 1950-1980, Projections 1985-2025*, six volumes (Geneva 1986)

At Vienna, women's groups were widely viewed as the best organized and most influential in official proceedings. Through that Conference, as through the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro and the three previous world conferences on women, women have learned that they can have an impact—not only on policies in their own countries, but also on international legislation.

That potential will again be unleashed at the Beijing Conference, which, coming after a series of major world conferences, will mark the culmination of more than two decades of work on human rights, population and social development. It will draw on the momentum created by the first three women's conferences—a momentum that generated important new laws, increased funding for projects aimed at improving women's lives, led to the creation of numerous new women's networks and galvanized the women's movement in general. It led many countries to create national bodies and appoint individuals mandated specifically to improve—and monitor—the status of women.

A new beginning

But the Conference will also mark a new beginning in the long process of improving the status of women. Veterans of the three previous United Nations conferences on women think the 1995 event will differ from its predecessors in significant ways. In 1975, 1980 and 1985, certain political issues influenced, even dominated, the discussions and decisions. The cold war, the question of Palestine and apartheid in South Africa dominated the agenda as divisive political issues. With recent developments, however, there is a new opportunity to focus more specifically on gender issues.

"We have to recognize that there is no women's agenda as such", exhorts Ms. Mongella. "There is just one national, one global agenda. But women will put different emphases and different priorities on the issues based on where they come from and where they want to go. The result will be that societies will be different, but built equally on the visions of men and women."

Mobilizing for Beijing

Preparations for Beijing are already under way at the global, regional and country levels. Ms. Mongella, the Conference Secretary-General, feels that preparations at the national level are especially crucial, as they are likely to have the most immediate impact on people's lives. All sectors of society should be a part of the process, she says, from Governments, NGOs, the private sector and the media to individual women and men of all ages. "Preparations should be a process of national reflection and reach the women at the grass roots, whose voices are seldom heard."

Both nationally and regionally, Governments and NGOs are preparing reports on the situation of women since 1985, assessing obstacles and progress as well as stimulating broad national debate. These reports will be discussed at five regional preparatory meetings, scheduled to take place in

1994 in Indonesia, Argentina, Austria, Jordan and Senegal.

At the same time, many of the issues to be debated in Beijing will also be considered at other upcoming international conferences, including the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, March 1995). At the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, September 1995), the status of women was widely discussed. The 50th anniversary of the United Nations (1995) will provide yet another opportunity for highlighting women's issues.

NGOs will play a vital role at the Conference and at a parallel NGO Forum. Planning for this event is progressing under the auspices of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (CONGO). As with previous United Nations conferences, the Beijing Forum is being planned as an event open to all. It will take place at the Beijing Workers' Sports Service Center, a site close to the Beijing International Convention Center, where the World Conference will convene.

Gathering and disseminating information on the situation of women will be one of the most important activities of the Conference and its preparatory meetings. In addition to the Platform for Action, the Conference will consider a second, updated edition of the United Nations publication *The World's Women: Trends and Statistics*; the *1994 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*; and an update on the implementation of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.

For further information, contact: Department of Public Information,
Room S-955, United Nations, New York, NY 10017 USA. Tel: (212) 963-1742, fax (212) 963-4556,
or the Division for the Advancement of Women, Room DC2-1220, United Nations, New York NY 10017, USA,
tel (212) 963-8385, fax (212) 963-3463

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
Printed by the United Nations Reproduction Section, New York
DPI/1424 - Rev.1 — October 1994 — 20M